

Rep. Magnafici: Northwest WI deserves more mental health resources

Posted on Friday, Aug 16, 2019

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Last month, I had the opportunity to attend a public hearing for the Speaker's Task Force on Adoption in Balsam Lake. The hearing covered a number of topics related to adoption, and speakers with a wide variety of views and opinions on the subject of adoption took time out of their day to provide firsthand testimony about their experiences.

Among those offering their perspective was Polk County Sheriff Brent Waak. With clear frustration in his voice, Sheriff Waak described how Governor Evers vetoed a portion of the state legislature's budget that allocated \$15 million for a mental health care facility in Eau Claire.

According to the Sheriff, many issues the Department faces on a daily basis stem from or are exacerbated by mental health issues. All too often, people that would otherwise seek out mental health resources may turn to drugs or alcohol to self-medicate when the resources they need are hours away.

Sheriff Waak's testimony is not first time I have heard local law enforcement emphasize the need for more mental healthcare access in our area. Law enforcement frequently cite Chapter 51 cases as one of the largest drain on department resources that they face. Chapter 51 cases involve the involuntary detainment of mentally ill patients who are exhibiting substantial harm to themselves or others.

This is a concern for Waak and other members of our law enforcement community because they're required by law to send two officers from our local police

departments to drive patients five hours to Winnebago County Mental Health Institute.

This extended travel time is a tremendous burden to patients, officers, and departments – and means these officers are occupied driving across the state instead of at home protecting our communities. In instances like these, having a facility just down the road in Eau Claire would make a tremendous difference, helping to free up our officers for other critical work.

Recently, Rep. Rob Stafsholt has been spearheading one potential solution to this problem. Stafsholt is proposing a pilot program in which patients in these cases would receive treatment in our area, instead of being driven across the state.

Ideally, this program will allow patients to receive treatment closer to home. Treating patients in our own area is beneficial for them, the families and friends who come to support them, and the law enforcement that can reduce the amount of resources they must devote to travel for these cases.

On Friday, I will also be meeting with other northwest Wisconsin legislators to discuss the next steps for pursuing a regional mental health care facility, similar to the one vetoed by Governor Evers. With rates of mental illness on the rise, it is imperative that we increase the availability of mental health services in Wisconsin as we continue to address the underlying causes of such illnesses.

I believe a regional facility is crucial for the continued improvement of mental healthcare in our area, and I look forward to working with my fellow legislators, law enforcement, and DHS representatives to find a solution that both Republicans and Democrats will support.

Northwest Wisconsin deserves more mental health resources. As the legislative session continues, I look forward to supporting these two initiatives along with others that will no doubt be proposed. If you have ideas on this topic that you'd like to share with me, I encourage you to reach out to me at rep.magnafici@legis.wisconsin.gov or at 608-267-2365